Tablet

Middle East

AN INSIDER'S GUIDE TO THE MOST IMPORTANT STORY ON EARTH

A former AP correspondent explains how and why reporters get Israel so wrong, and why it matters

By Matti Friedman
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A TV reporter does a stand-up near the Israeli/Gaza border as a 24-hour ceasefire begins on July 27, 2014. *(Ilia Yefimovich/Getty Images)*

The Israel Story

Is there anything left to say about Israel and Gaza? Newspapers this summer have been full of little else. Television viewers see heaps of rubble and plumes of smoke in their sleep. A representative article from a recent issue of *The New Yorker* described the summer's events by dedicating one sentence each to the horrors in Nigeria and Ukraine, four sentences to the crazed *génocidaires* of ISIS, and the rest of the article—30 sentences—to Israel and Gaza.

When the hysteria abates, I believe the events in Gaza will not be remembered by the world as particularly important. People were killed, most of them Palestinians, including many unarmed innocents. I wish I could say the tragedy of their deaths, or the deaths of Israel's soldiers, will change something, that they mark a turning point. But they don't. This round was not the first in the Arab wars with Israel and will not be the last. The Israeli campaign was little different in its execution from any other waged by a Western army against a similar enemy in recent years, except for the more immediate nature of the threat to a country's own population, and the greater exertions, however futile, to avoid civilian deaths.

The lasting importance of this summer's war, I believe, doesn't lie in the war itself. It lies instead in the way the war has been described and responded to abroad, and the way this has laid bare the resurgence of an old, twisted pattern of thought and its migration from the margins to the mainstream of Western discourse—namely, a hostile obsession with Jews. The key to understanding this resurgence is not to be found among jihadi webmasters, basement conspiracy theorists, or radical activists. It is instead to be found first among the educated and respectable people who populate the international news industry; decent people, many of them, and some of them my former colleagues.

While global mania about Israeli actions has come to be taken for granted, it is actually the result of decisions made by individual human beings in positions of responsibility—in this case, journalists and editors. The world is not responding to events in this country, but rather to the description of these events by news organizations. The key to understanding the strange nature of the response is thus to be found in the practice of journalism, and specifically in a severe malfunction that is occurring in that profession—my profession—here in Israel.

In this essay I will try to provide a few tools to make sense of the news from Israel. I acquired these tools as an insider: Between 2006 and the end of 2011 I was a reporter and editor in the Jerusalem bureau of the Associated Press, one of the world's two biggest news providers. I have lived in Israel since 1995 and have been reporting on it since 1997.

This essay is not an exhaustive survey of the sins of the international media, a conservative polemic, or a defense of Israeli policies. (I am a believer in the importance of the "mainstream" media, a liberal, and a critic of many of my country's policies.) It necessarily involves some generalizations. I will first outline the central tropes of the international media's Israel story—a story on which there is surprisingly little variation among mainstream outlets, and one which is, as the word "story" suggests, a narrative construct that is largely fiction. I will then note the broader historical context of the way Israel has come

to be discussed and explain why I believe it to be a matter of concern not only for people preoccupied with Jewish affairs. I will try to keep it brief.

How Important Is the Israel Story?

Staffing is the best measure of the importance of a story to a particular news organization. When I was a correspondent at the AP, the agency had more than 40 staffers covering Israel and the Palestinian territories. That was significantly more news staff than the AP had in China, Russia, or India, or in all of the 50 countries of sub-Saharan Africa combined. It was higher than the total number of news-gathering employees in all the countries where the uprisings of the "Arab Spring" eventually erupted.

To offer a sense of scale: Before the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, the permanent AP presence in that country consisted of a single regime-approved stringer. The AP's editors believed, that is, that Syria's importance was less than one-40th that of Israel. I don't mean to pick on the AP—the agency is wholly average, which makes it useful as an example. The big players in the news business practice groupthink, and these staffing arrangements were reflected across the herd. Staffing levels in Israel have decreased somewhat since the Arab uprisings began, but remain high. And when Israel flares up, as it did this summer, reporters are often moved from deadlier conflicts. Israel still trumps nearly everything else.

The volume of press coverage that results, even when little is going on, gives this conflict a prominence compared to which its actual human toll is absurdly small. In all of 2013, for example, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict claimed 42 lives—that is, roughly the monthly homicide rate in the city of Chicago. Jerusalem, internationally renowned as a city of conflict, had slightly fewer violent deaths per capita last year than Portland, Ore., one of America's safer cities. In contrast, in three years the Syrian conflict has claimed an estimated 190,000 lives, or about 70,000 more than the number of people who have ever died in the Arab-Israeli conflict since it began a century ago.

News organizations have nonetheless decided that this conflict is more important than, for example, the more than 1,600 women murdered in Pakistan last year (271 after being raped and 193 of them burned alive), the ongoing erasure of Tibet by the Chinese Communist Party, the carnage in Congo (more than 5 million dead as of 2012) or the Central African Republic, and the drug wars in Mexico (death toll between 2006 and 2012: 60,000), let alone conflicts no one has ever heard of in obscure corners of India or Thailand. They believe Israel to be the most important story on earth, or very close.

What Is Important About the Israel Story, and What Is Not

A reporter working in the international press corps here understands quickly that what is important in the Israel-Palestinian story is Israel. If you follow mainstream coverage, you will find nearly no real analysis of Palestinian society or ideologies, profiles of armed Palestinian groups, or investigation of Palestinian government. Palestinians are not taken seriously as agents of their own fate. The West has decided that Palestinians should want a state alongside Israel, so that opinion is attributed to them as fact, though anyone who has spent time with actual Palestinians understands that things are (understandably, in my opinion) more complicated. Who they are and what they want is not important: The story mandates that they exist as passive victims of the party that matters.

Corruption, for example, is a pressing concern for many Palestinians under the rule of the Palestinian Authority, but when I and another reporter once suggested an article on the subject, we were informed by the bureau chief that Palestinian corruption was "not the story." (Israeli corruption was, and we covered it at length.)

Israeli actions are analyzed and criticized, and every flaw in Israeli society is aggressively reported. In one seven-week period, from Nov. 8 to Dec. 16, 2011, I decided to count the stories coming out of our bureau on the various moral failings of Israeli society—proposed legislation meant to suppress the media, the rising influence of Orthodox Jews, unauthorized settlement outposts, gender segregation, and so forth. I counted 27 separate articles, an average of a story every two days. In a very conservative estimate, this seven-week tally was higher than the total number of significantly critical stories about Palestinian government and society, including the totalitarian Islamists of Hamas, that our bureau had published in the preceding three years.

The Hamas charter, for example, calls not just for Israel's destruction but for the murder of Jews and blames Jews for engineering the French and Russian revolutions and both world wars; the charter was never mentioned in print when I was at the AP, though Hamas won a Palestinian national election and had become one of the region's most important players. To draw the link with this summer's events: An observer might think Hamas' decision in recent years to construct a military infrastructure beneath Gaza's civilian infrastructure would be deemed newsworthy, if only because of what it meant about the way the next conflict would be fought and the cost to innocent people. But that is not the case. The Hamas emplacements were not important in themselves, and were therefore ignored. What was important was the Israeli decision to attack them.

There has been much discussion recently of Hamas attempts to intimidate reporters. Any veteran of the press corps here knows the intimidation is real, and I saw it in action myself as an editor on the AP news desk. During the 2008-2009 Gaza fighting I personally erased a key detail—that Hamas fighters were dressed as civilians and being counted as civilians in the death toll—because of a threat to our reporter in Gaza. (The policy was then, and remains, not to inform readers that the story is censored unless the censorship is Israeli. Earlier this month, the AP's Jerusalem news editor reported and submitted a story on Hamas intimidation; the story was shunted into deep freeze by his superiors and has not been published.)

But if critics imagine that journalists are clamoring to cover Hamas and are stymied by thugs and threats, it is generally not so. There are many low-risk ways to report Hamas actions, if the will is there: under bylines from Israel, under no byline, by citing Israeli sources. Reporters are resourceful when they want to be.

The fact is that Hamas intimidation is largely beside the point because the actions of Palestinians are beside the point: Most reporters in Gaza believe their job is to document violence directed by Israel at Palestinian civilians. That is the essence of the Israel story. In addition, reporters are under deadline and often at risk, and many don't speak the language and have only the most tenuous grip on what is going on. They are dependent on Palestinian colleagues and fixers who either fear Hamas, support Hamas, or both. Reporters don't need Hamas enforcers to shoo them away from facts that muddy the simple story they have been sent to tell.

It is not coincidence that the few journalists who have documented Hamas fighters and rocket launches in civilian areas this summer were generally not, as you might expect, from the large news organizations with big and permanent Gaza operations. They were mostly scrappy, peripheral, and newly arrived players—a Finn, an Indian crew, a few others. These poor souls didn't get the memo.

What Else Isn't Important?

The fact that Israelis quite recently elected moderate governments that sought reconciliation with the Palestinians, and which were undermined by the Palestinians, is considered unimportant and rarely mentioned. These lacunae are often not oversights but a matter of policy. In early 2009, for example, two colleagues of mine obtained information that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had made a significant peace offer to the Palestinian Authority several months earlier, and that the Palestinians had deemed it insufficient. This had not been reported yet and it was—or should have been—one of the biggest stories of the year. The reporters obtained confirmation from both sides and one even saw a map, but the top editors at the bureau decided that they would not publish the story.

Some staffers were furious, but it didn't help. Our narrative was that the Palestinians were moderate and the Israelis recalcitrant and increasingly extreme. Reporting the Olmert offer—like delving too deeply into the subject of Hamas—would make that narrative look like nonsense. And so we were instructed to ignore it, and did, for more than a year and a half.

This decision taught me a lesson that should be clear to consumers of the Israel story: Many of the people deciding what you will read and see from here view their role not as explanatory but as political. Coverage is a weapon to be placed at the disposal of the side they like.

How Is the Israel Story Framed?

The Israel story is framed in the same terms that have been in use since the early 1990s—the quest for a "two-state solution." It is accepted that the conflict is "Israeli-Palestinian," meaning that it is a conflict taking place on land that Israel controls—0.2 percent of the Arab world—in which Jews are a majority and Arabs a minority. The conflict is more accurately described as "Israel-Arab," or "Jewish-Arab"—that is, a conflict between the 6 million Jews of Israel and 300 million Arabs in surrounding countries. (Perhaps "Israel-Muslim" would be more accurate, to take into account the enmity of non-Arab states like Iran and Turkey, and, more broadly, 1 billion Muslims worldwide.) This is the conflict that has been playing out in different forms for a century, before Israel existed, before Israel captured the Palestinian territories of Gaza and the West Bank, and before the term "Palestinian" was in use.

The "Israeli-Palestinian" framing allows the Jews, a tiny minority in the Middle East, to be depicted as the stronger party. It also includes the implicit assumption that if the Palestinian problem is somehow solved the conflict will be over, though no informed person today believes this to be true. This definition also allows the Israeli settlement project, which I believe is a serious moral and strategic error on Israel's part, to be described not as what it is—one more destructive symptom of the conflict—but rather as its cause.

A knowledgeable observer of the Middle East cannot avoid the impression that the region is a volcano and that the lava is radical Islam, an ideology whose various incarnations are now shaping this part of the world. Israel is a tiny village on the slopes of the volcano. Hamas is the local representative of radical Islam and is openly dedicated to the eradication of the Jewish minority enclave in Israel, just as Hezbollah is the dominant representative of radical Islam in Lebanon, the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and so forth.

Hamas is not, as it freely admits, party to the effort to create a Palestinian state alongside Israel. It has different goals about which it is quite open and that are similar to those of the groups listed above. Since the mid 1990s, more than any other player, Hamas has destroyed the Israeli left, swayed moderate Israelis against territorial withdrawals, and buried the chances of a two-state compromise. That's one accurate way to frame the story.

An observer might also legitimately frame the story through the lens of minorities in the Middle East, all of which are under intense pressure from Islam: When minorities are helpless, their fate is that of the Yazidis or Christians of northern Iraq, as we have just seen, and when they are armed and organized they can fight back and survive, as in the case of the Jews and (we must hope) the Kurds.

There are, in other words, many different ways to see what is happening here. Jerusalem is less than a day's drive from Aleppo or Baghdad, and it should be clear to everyone that peace is pretty elusive in the Middle East even in places where Jews are absent. But reporters generally cannot see the Israel story in relation to anything else. Instead of describing Israel as one of the villages abutting the volcano, they describe Israel as the volcano.

The Israel story is framed to seem as if it has nothing to do with events nearby because the "Israel" of international journalism does not exist in the same geo-political universe as Iraq, Syria, or Egypt. The Israel story is not a story about current events. It is about something else.

The Old Blank Screen

For centuries, stateless Jews played the role of a lightning rod for ill will among the majority population. They were a symbol of things that were wrong. Did you want to make the point that greed was bad? Jews were greedy. Cowardice? Jews were cowardly. Were you a Communist? Jews were capitalists. Were you a capitalist? In that case, Jews were Communists. Moral failure was the essential trait of the Jew. It was their role in Christian tradition—the only reason European society knew or cared about them in the first place.

Like many Jews who grew up late in the 20th century in friendly Western cities, I dismissed such ideas as the feverish memories of my grandparents. One thing I have learned—and I'm not alone this summer—is that I was foolish to have done so. Today, people in the West tend to believe the ills of the age are racism, colonialism, and militarism. The world's only Jewish country has done less harm than most countries on earth, and more good—and yet when people went looking for a country that would symbolize the sins of our new post-colonial, post-militaristic, post-ethnic dream-world, the country they chose was this one.

When the people responsible for explaining the world to the world, journalists, cover the Jews' war as more worthy of attention than any other, when they portray the Jews of Israel as the party obviously in the wrong, when they omit all possible justifications for the Jews' actions and obscure the true face of their enemies, what they are saying to their readers—whether they intend to or not—is that Jews are the worst people on earth. The Jews are a symbol of the evils that civilized people are taught from an early age to abhor. International press coverage has become a morality play starring a familiar villain.

Some readers might remember that Britain participated in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the fallout from which has now killed more than three times the number of people ever killed in the Israel-Arab conflict; yet in Britain, protesters furiously condemn Jewish militarism. White people in London and Paris whose parents not long ago had themselves fanned by dark people in the sitting rooms of Rangoon or Algiers condemn Jewish "colonialism." Americans who live in places called "Manhattan" or "Seattle" condemn Jews for displacing the native people of Palestine. Russian reporters condemn Israel's brutal military tactics. Belgian reporters condemn Israel's treatment of Africans. When Israel opened a transportation service for Palestinian workers in the occupied West Bank a few years ago, American news consumers could read about Israel "segregating buses." And there are a lot of people in Europe, and not just in Germany, who enjoy hearing the Jews accused of genocide.

You don't need to be a history professor, or a psychiatrist, to understand what's going on. Having rehabilitated themselves against considerable odds in a minute corner of the earth, the descendants of powerless people who were pushed out of Europe and the Islamic Middle East have become what their grandparents were—the pool into which the world spits. The Jews of Israel are the screen onto which it has become socially acceptable to project the things you hate about yourself and your own country. The tool through which this psychological projection is executed is the international press.

Who Cares If the World Gets the Israel Story Wrong?

Because a gap has opened here between the way things are and the way they are described, opinions are wrong and policies are wrong, and observers are regularly blindsided by events. Such things have happened before. In the years leading to the breakdown of Soviet Communism in 1991, as the Russia expert Leon Aron wrote in a 2011 essay for *Foreign Policy*, "virtually no Western expert, scholar, official, or politician foresaw the impending collapse of the Soviet Union." The empire had been rotting for years and the signs were there, but the people who were supposed to be seeing and reporting them failed and when the superpower imploded everyone was surprised.

And there was the Spanish civil war: "Early in life I had noticed that no event is ever correctly reported in a newspaper, but in Spain, for the first time, I saw newspaper reports which do not bear any relation to the facts, not even the relationship which is implied in an ordinary lie. … I saw, in fact, history being written not in terms of what had happened but of what ought to have happened according to various 'party lines.' " That was George Orwell, writing in 1942.

Whatever the outcome in this region in the next decade, it will have as much to do with Israel as World War II had to do with Spain

Orwell did not step off an airplane in Catalonia, stand next to a Republican cannon, and have himself filmed while confidently repeating what everyone else was saying or describing what any fool could see: weaponry, rubble, bodies. He looked beyond the ideological fantasies of his peers and knew that what was important was not necessarily visible. Spain, he understood, was not really about Spain at all—it was about a clash of totalitarian systems, German and Russian. He knew he was witnessing a threat to European civilization, and he wrote that, and he was right.

Understanding what happened in Gaza this summer means understanding Hezbollah in Lebanon, the rise of the Sunni jihadis in Syria and Iraq, and the long tentacles of Iran. It requires figuring out why countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia now see themselves as closer to Israel than to Hamas. Above all, it requires us to understand what is clear to nearly everyone in the Middle East: The ascendant force in our part of the world is not democracy or modernity. It is rather an empowered strain of Islam that assumes different and sometimes conflicting forms, and that is willing to employ extreme violence in a quest to unite the region under its control and confront the West. Those who grasp this fact will be able to look around and connect the dots.

Israel is not an idea, a symbol of good or evil, or a litmus test for liberal opinion at dinner parties. It is a small country in a scary part of the world that is getting scarier. It should be reported as critically as any other place, and understood in context and in proportion. Israel is not one of the most important stories in the world, or even in the Middle East; whatever the outcome in this region in the next decade, it will have as much to do with Israel as World War II had to do with Spain. Israel is a speck on the map—a sideshow that happens to carry an unusual emotional charge.

Many in the West clearly prefer the old comfort of parsing the moral failings of Jews, and the familiar feeling of superiority this brings them, to confronting an unhappy and confusing reality. They may convince themselves that all of this is the Jews' problem, and indeed the Jews' fault. But journalists engage in these fantasies at the cost of their credibility and that of their profession. And, as Orwell would tell us, the world entertains fantasies at its peril.

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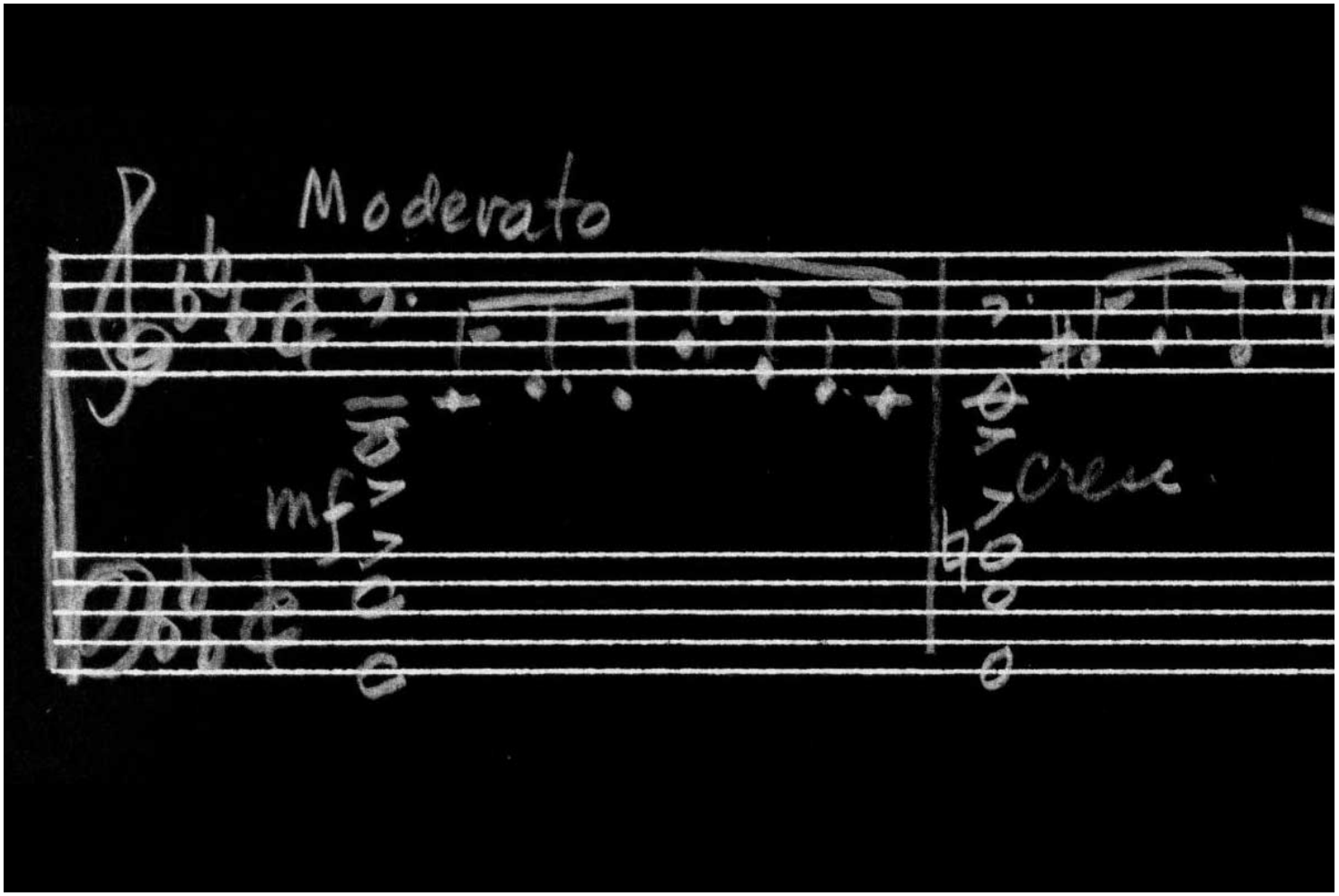


"Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" Autograph score, 1932. *(University of Michigan Library Digital Collections.)*

On Apr. 7, 1932, Franklin Roosevelt, then governor of New York, gave his first coast-to-coast radio address on the National Broadcasting Company. He called for economic solutions that rose "from the bottom up," and for financial support for farmers and relief to small banks and homeowners. And he asked Americans to have faith "once more in the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid."

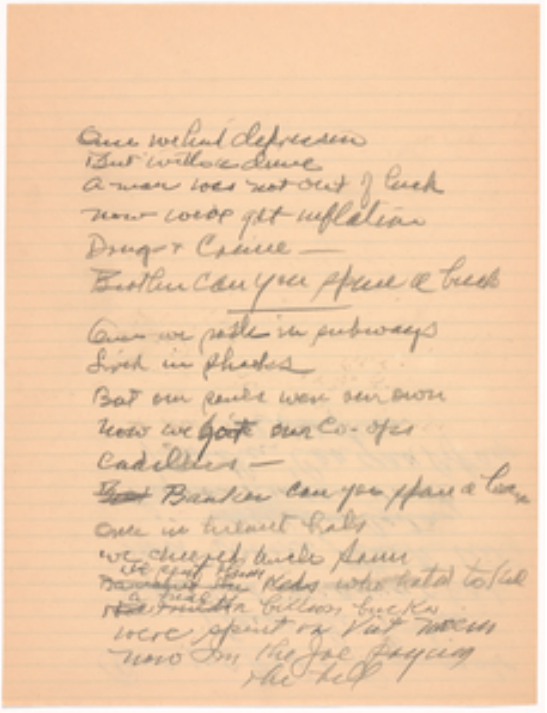
That summer, a song written in 1930 capturing the spirit of the forgotten man's struggle shot to the top of the charts: Jay Gorney and E.Y. "Yip" Harburg's "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" Gorney had fled Bialystok with his family following a major pogrom, and Harburg was the child of immigrants. Both men were outsiders due to their Jewishness and their left-leaning politics, yet their description of the forgotten American resonated across the nation.

Gorney and Harburg crafted the song for the Lee Shubert revue, *Americana*, which took the "forgotten man" as the over-arching theme for its variety show of drama, song, dance, and marionette acts. The revue ran for 77 performances and was the third iteration of *Americana*, after ones in 1926 and 1928. Like its contemporary *Show Boat* (1927), *Americana* had a theme, but unlike that first true "book" musical, *Americana*'s vaudeville roots showed in the eclecticism of the acts.

Journalist J.P. McEvoy, later an editor for *Reader's Digest*, inspired the three *Americana* musicals, as did H.L. Mencken's monthly "Americana" column. The Broadway composer Vincent Youmans collected a $10,000 advance to score the 1932 Americana but promptly left the project due to personal problems. Yip Harburg took up the reigns, bringing in composers with whom he would ultimately collaborate on a

career of successful songs: Jay Gorney, Burton Lane, Vernon Duke, Harold Arlen, Johnny Mercer, and others.

Gorney and Harburg were introduced by mutual friend Ira Gershwin, who was busy writing lyrics to accompany his brother George's gorgeous jazz pieces. Gorney and Harburg initially labored as staff composers for Paramount's New York studio. They wrote uncredited pieces for a number of Fleischer Brothers cartoons and assembled songs and sketches for the variety program *The Eveready Hour*. The duo crafted the song "What Wouldn't I Do for That Man?" for the musical *Applause* (1929) and the song "Hot Moonlight" for the revue *Shoot the Works* (1931). "What Wouldn't I Do for That Man?" appeared in the 1929 film, *Glorifying the American Girl*. Prior to *Americana*, Gorney/Harburg songs also appeared in Earl Carroll's *Sketch Book* (1929), *Earl Carroll Vanities* (1930), and *Ziegfeld Follies* (1931).



Brother can you spare a buck (Lyrics) / E. Y. (Edgar Yipsel) Harburg (*New York Public Library*)

Jay Gorney was born Abraham Jacob Gornetzky in Bialystok within the Pale of Settlement in 1896. The Gornetzky family resettled in Detroit and Gorney earned two degrees from the University of Michigan. Gorney served in WWI, playing music for the troops at home, and had a successful jazz band. He abandoned law for a career in music. By luck or guile, Gorney became a fixture at the Gershwins' musical evenings, rubbing shoulders with a network of music professionals who helped his career.

Harburg, born 122 years ago this weekend, was the son of immigrants. He grew up in the Lower East Side of New York City, where Jewish culture dominated his world. Jumping head first into American life, Harburg's father Lewis took his young son to the theater rather than to synagogue (and hid these escapades from Harburg's mother Mary). In high school Harburg sat near his friend Ira Gershwin, who introduced him to recordings of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. Harburg's stake in an electrical appliance business faltered at the dawn of the Great Depression; by some accounts, the business lost $250,000. Harburg often claimed the death of the business led him to become a full-time lyricist, but the desire to change careers likely preceded the financial downturn.

Jay Gorney's music for "Brother" grew out of a lullaby his mother had sung him in Russia. Listeners sometimes point out that "Brother" resembles the song that would become Israel's national anthem, "Hatikvah," which was adapted by composer Samuel Cohen in 1888 from songs popular in Eastern Europe, including work by Giuseppe Cenci and Bedrich Smetana. Gorney's music initially had been accompanied by traditional "torch song" (love song) lyrics but Harburg suggested that the tune and its original lyrics were mismatched. As the song's (possibly apocryphal) creation tale goes, the songwriter and lyricist were walking in Central Park when they came across a man in stylish but shabby clothes who called to them, "Brother, can you spare a dime?" Gorney and Harburg instantly agreed that the phrase captured the mood of the day, and Yip rushed home to set words to paper.

1932 proved a banner year for Harburg, who had hit songs in three Broadway shows concurrently. "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" ran in *Americana*, "It's Only a Paper Moon" (Harold Arlen/Harburg)

in *The Great Magoo*, and "April in Paris" (Vernon Duke/Harburg) featured in *Walk a Little Faster*. Harburg later became best known for his 1939 work, "Over the Rainbow," which he wrote with Harold Arlen, and the other songs from the film *The Wizard of Oz*. "Over the Rainbow" has proved of enduring resonance, with its latest notable use in the finale in the fundraising concert Ariana Grande held in Manchester, England in June 2017 following the terrorist attack in that city.

There are at least 52 recordings of "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" produced in English within the United States, and the song was also popular abroad. Bing Crosby recorded "Brother" in 1932, followed shortly thereafter by Rudy Vallee's rendition. *Variety*'s charts of top ranking songs (separated by publisher as well as location—New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles) had both Crosby's and Vallee's recordings at No. 1 in various markets in late 1932 or early 1933. Bing's recording in particular contributed to the immediate and long-term success of the tune, and was a major hit for the singer, who propelled the song's title into the popular lexicon. The title refrain became the calling card for fundraising efforts and newspaper ads, and appeared widely in popular media.

The *Americana* sketch preceding the singing of "Brother" involved some gangsters seeking the good will of a local judge and planning for a breadline to be held on a city street as a political stunt. Theater scholar Ethan Mordden calls the song's importance "really more political than musical." Its power stems, he says, "not only from the grandeur of Gorney's melody, but from Harburg's imagery as well." It is important to note how the main character of "Brother" has thrown himself into the work of nation building, including the construction of skyscrapers and the laying of track:

> Once I built a railroad
> Made it run
> Made it race against time
> Once I built a railroad
> Now it's done
> Brother, can you spare a dime?

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